

AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN COFFIN IN THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM.

Translations and Explanations of the Hieroglyphs

BY

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(Plate xxvii.)

One of the most interesting and valuable objects in the Archaeological Collection of the Australian Museum, Sydney, is undoubtedly the wooden box-shaped ancient Egyptian coffin which was found some few years ago, in a tomb, at a place in Upper Egypt called Beni-Hasan. According to the printed descriptive label attached to the glass containing case, it seems that when the tomb was opened up it was discovered that the grave had been rifled and the mummy removed from the coffin. It is quite possible that the latter itself has suffered somewhat as the result of the depredations of the unknown thieves, for the inscriptions and paintings are in a rather poor state of preservation; indeed, in some instances, the hieroglyphs are entirely obliterated.

The style of the coffin shows us that we can date it to the 12th Dynasty, that is to say, to somewhere about 2,300 B.C., at which time Amen-em-hat III. was the ruler of Egypt. This king carried out large irrigation works in connection with the great natural reservoir in the Fayyum, which was known to the Greeks as Lake Moeris. He is also thought to have built the Labyrinth, which the old historian Herodotus says contained twelve courts, and three thousand chambers, one thousand five hundred above ground and one thousand five hundred under ground, and covered an area about 1,000 feet long and 800 feet broad; this huge building was dedicated to the crocodile-god Sebek, and many sacred crocodiles were buried in a place specially set apart for them.

At the early date of which we are speaking the great Babylonian Empire had not been founded; the whole of Europe—with the exception, perhaps, of the isles of Cyprus and Crete, which were in the Early Bronze Age—was in the Stone Age culture; while the great Aryan influx from west central Asia did not take place for at least another two hundred years. The Hebrews, themselves, must have been simply wandering tribes living in Bedawin fashion amid the vast sandy wastes of Northern Mesopotamia, where they possibly originated, and worshipping the tribal god Yaweh, whom, at a later date, they identified with the God of the Universe. As a matter of fact, it is generally held that it was not until the time of Khammurabi, a king of the First Babylonian Dynasty (about B.C. 2,000) that the traditional tribal leader Abraham led the Hebrews down from Northern Mesopotamia, through Syria, where he defeated the five kings, to Southern Canaan.

Although more than four thousand years have passed away since the inscriptions and paintings were executed on the coffin sides and lid, yet we are able to read nearly all the texts and to learn the name of the person for whom the case was made. The hieroglyphs, which comprise several hundreds of curious signs—gods, men, birds, animals, and various animate and inanimate objects—contain prayers to the gods of the Other World for sepulchral offerings and felicity in the “Fields of Peace.” These prayers belong to the oldest form of the “Book of the Dead,” or Ancient Egyptian Funeral Liturgy, which we term the Heliopolitan Recension (on account of its being promulgated by the priests of Heliopolis, the On of the Old Testament) to distinguish it from the later Theban and Saite Recensions. The object of all the ceremonies and formulæ contained in the “Book of the Dead” was to endow the dead body with power to resist corruption, and to ensure it a renewed and beatified existence with the gods.

The deceased's name, which appears in several places on the coffin, is Neter-Nekht; he was the son of some person the latter part of whose name,ti, only can be read due to the fact of certain hieroglyphs being obliterated. According to the Museum's descriptive label one reads that Neter-Nekht (i.e., “Strong in god”) was the son of “Hetep,” but from a close examination of what remains of the signs for the name in question, the present writer has no hesitation in saying that this rendering is hardly correct.

Neter-Nekht was a “mer ahēt” or “Overseer of Farm Lands,” which was a very important office in ancient Nilotic days.

For the sake of clearness, and in order that the reader, if he so desires, may be able to compare the inscriptions drawn in plate, with those painted on the coffin, each side of the case will be treated separately. The numbers in the following text refer to the numbers on the plate.

The Coffin of Neter-Nekht.

Southern end:—This contains three separate lines of texts, which read as follows:—*Horizontal text*—(1) “The devotee before Isis, whose word is right and true.” *Perpendicular texts*—(2) “Devotee before Serqet, Neter-Nekht”; (3) “Devotee before the Little Company of Gods, Neter-Nekht.”

Explanations—Line (1) Isis was one of the greatest of all the Egyptian goddesses; she was the wife of Osiris, the supreme judge of the dead, and is usually depicted as a woman, with a head-dress in the form of a seat, the value of the hieroglyph for which forms her name. (2) Serqet was a scorpion-goddess. (3) At Heliopolis, the priests proclaimed the existence of three Companies of the gods; the first Company was called the “Great,” the second the “Little,” and the third had no special title: these Companies represented the gods of heaven, earth and Other World respectively. The “Little Company of Gods” which is mentioned on the end of the coffin under review was formed of eleven deities.

Northern end:—This end also contains three lines of texts:—*Horizontal text*—(4) “The devotee before Nephthys.” *Perpendicular texts*—

(5) "The devotee before the Great Company of Gods, Neter-Nekht, whose word is right and true;" (6) "The devotee before Neith, Neter-Nekht."

Explanations—(4) Nephthys, another great goddess of the Other World, was the sister of Osiris and Isis. (5) The "Great Company of Gods" consisted of between ten to thirteen deities. (6) Neith personified the place in the sky where the sun rises. In one form she was the goddess of the loom and shuttle, and also of the chase, while in another aspect she appears in the likeness of a cow.

Lid:—This contains a single line of hieroglyphs which reads:—(7) "May the king give an offering! The god Anubis, the lord of the town of Sepa, the dweller in the divine house; may he grant that thou may traverse heaven, and that thou may be united to (*i.e.*, arrive at) the double-staircase of the Great God, the lord of heaven, O Neter-Nekht, son ofti."

Explanations—(7) The words "May the king give an offering" are written at the commencement of most ancient Egyptian sepulchral inscriptions. When we recollect that the king was considered a god, and worshipped as such, we are not surprised when we read that every pious Egyptian prayed to him for an offering, just as he prayed to Osiris and Ra, or to the other deities who dwelt in heaven. Anubis, who was a god in jackal-form, presided over embalmment ceremonies; the phrase "divine house" doubtless refers to the tomb-chamber wherein the god was supposed to dwell. The "great god, the lord of heaven" was Osiris, who was believed to sit on a throne at the top of a flight of stairs.

Western end:—This contains one horizontal line and four perpendicular lines of text:—*Horizontal text*—(8) "May grant a royal offering Anubis, he who is upon his hill, the dweller in the mummy chamber, the lord of the Holy Land, and a beautiful burial in the Mountain of the West [so that] he (*i.e.*, the deceased), may journey in peace, in peace, to his tomb-chamber in Neter-Kher. Neter-Nekht." *Perpendicular texts*—(9) "Devotee before Hapi, Neter-Nekht;" (10) "Devotee before Geb, Neter-Nekht;" (11) "Devotee before Nut, Neter-Nekht;" (12) "Devotee before Qebhsennuf, Neter-Nekht."

Explanations—(8) The god Anubis has already been described. The "Mountain of the West" was a common name for the whole region containing the abode of the dead, which was situated in the high hills on the western bank of the Nile. "Neter-Kher" was the name for the cemetery itself; it means, literally, "Divine Subteranean Place." (9) Hapi, a dog-headed god, protected the small intestines of the deceased which were removed in the process of embalmment. (10) Geb, a goose-shaped deity, was the god of the earth. (11) Nut was the great goddess of the sky. (12) Qebhsennuf, a hawk-headed deity, protected the liver and gall bladder of the deceased.

Eastern end:—One horizontal line and four perpendicular lines of text:—*Horizontal text*—(13) "May the king give an offering; and Osiris, the lord of the town of Busiris, the great god, the lord of the town of Abydos, may he grant sepulchral offerings of cakes and ale, oxen and geese,

linen garments, incense, oil, and everything beautiful, to the overseer of the farm-lands, Neter-Nekht." *Perpendicular texts*—(14) "Devotee before Amseth, Neter-Nekht;" (15) "Devotee before Shu, Neter-Nekht;" (16) "Devotee before Tefnut, Neter-Nekht;" (17) "Devotee before Dnamutef, Neter-Nekht."

Explanations—(13) This line needs no discussion. (14) Amseth, a man-headed god, protected the stomach and large intestines. (15) Shu was the god of light, and of dryness; he may be compared to the Atlas of classical writers, and is often depicted as a crouching man supporting the disk of the sun on his shoulders. (16) Tefnut was the twin sister of Shu; she represented in one form moisture and in another form the power of sunlight. This goddess kept thirst away from the dead. (17) Dnamutef, a jackal-headed god, looked after the lungs and heart.

Between the first two perpendicular lines of text (Nos. 14 and 15) on the eastern end of the coffin are painted two sacred eyes, and when the mummy was placed in the coffin its face was turned towards these, as it was believed that the deceased would then be able to gaze out of his case and watch the priest making the periodical offerings in the tomb-chamber. Underneath the eyes is depicted a bolted and barred door which is supposed to represent that of a tomb-chamber of the earliest period.

Translations of lines numbered 7, 8 and 13, respectively, in this article, have already been given by another scholar, as will be seen from the descriptive card in the case, but in certain instances the present writer has ventured to depart from the official readings where he believes that the true values of the hieroglyphs warrant such. The texts shown on the plate were copied from the coffin by the kind authority of the Director of the Australian Museum.

[The Coffin described by Mr. Rowe is six feet two inches in length, by sixteen inches broad, and in depth one foot ten and three-quarter inches; the bottom is wanting. It was disinterred at Beni-Hasan, Upper Egypt, and obtained through the instrumentality of Mr. John Garstang, of the Department of Egyptian Archaeology in the University of Liverpool, England.—(Editor)].